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How to Raise a Genius

By NICHOLAS WEINSTOCK New York Times

Last summer, after much consideration, Toby Rosenberg announced to his friends and family that he had decided to change his name. "Toby," he felt, was "a little boy's name." Going forward, he would be called Karl, like his father before him. His school made note of the switch. His parents had no argument. Toby -- now Karl -- was 5 years old.

And he had a point: regardless of his age, Karl has never been a little boy. At 14 months, he began to read aloud from the posters he was pushed past in his stroller. It would be another full year before he truly conversed; but once he did, his fluent English and Polish (his mother, Anna, 40, is from Krakow) were soon joined by other languages. He trained himself to write Japanese after studying the side of a sake bottle. He taught himself the Hebrew alphabet after catching sight of the characters on a dreidel. Last year, after seeing a book in a museum shop on ancient Egypt, he compiled a dictionary of heiro-glyphics. The impression you get upon making his acquaintance is that of a bookish teenager, a middle-aged Polish diplomat and a gabby Brooklyn grandmother trapped together in the taut body of a first grader.

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"You don't know what it's like with Karl," his father says, laughing tiredly. An artist turned Web-site designer, Karl Sr., 61, spends at least an hour every afternoon in the family's one-bedroom Brooklyn apartment drafting sketches and submitting them to his son's critiques. "He stands behind me and tells me to draw things over and over to his specifications," Karl says. "Beam construction, Russian churches. If he's not on the Internet, he's here, issuing commands over my shoulder. We just want to encourage his interests and support him any way we can. Nobody in this household is trying to tell him what to do." Which is just as it should be.

1. Don't overstructure your child's life. Experts advise parents of hyper-intelligent children not to be too controlling. "Profoundly gifted kids are highly curious and likely to pursue all kinds of interests with great passion," says Sandra Berger, a gifted-education specialist for more than 20 years. "It's best to let the child's interests be your guide, and to follow the path created by his or her love of learning. As a parent, if you try and put yourself in that path, you're likely to get knocked around."

2. Provide as many learning opportunities as possible. Parents should strive to introduce their children to as wide an array of subjects as they can, not only through field trips and museum tours but also by treating everyday surroundings as experiential playgrounds. It was reportedly his early rambles in the woods with his father that alerted Richard Feynman, the Nobel-prize-winning physicist, to the complexity of life. For Karl, it was drives past the Williamsburg Bridge that piqued his avid interest in truss construction.

Such interests can prove a distraction. Taking his Educational Records Bureau exam in January, Karl spent much of the allotted time lecturing the test-givers on the architectural quirks of the Chrysler Building visible through the classroom window. (The urns jutting from the 29th floor, he is fond of pointing out, were modeled after the hood ornament on the 1929 Chrysler Plymouth.) Trying to summarize the erratic score that resulted, the E.R.B. made particular -- if rather stoic -- mention of Karl's "most noteworthy . . . fund of knowledge."

Of course, even without a standardized-test score, Karl's parents know he's a genius -- and they know that they should never, ever use that term.

3. Avoid calling your child a genius. "There are three reasons the label could only be unhelpful," says Dr. Jack Shonkoff, an expert on early childhood development. "One, it puts an enormous burden on the kid that he or she will have trouble living up to. Two, it's a setup for other people -- relatives, teachers -- to be disappointed in the kid's future performance. And three, it serves to set the child apart from other children." Extremely talented kids are pigeonholed enough as it is; the last thing they need is a label that ostracizes them further."

4. Don't expect your child to be popular. Combating social isolation may be the greatest challenge for those raising exceptionally intelligent kids. Karl has had a typically uphill battle finding a school -- let alone a circle of friends -- that can contain him. At 3 years old, he was asked to leave his preschool program at the local Y.M.C.A. when his obvious boredom rendered him, in his teacher's opinion, a bad influence on the other children. After a search, his parents discovered the East Manhattan School for Bright and Gifted Children, only to watch the independent school close its doors this winter. Karl has since transferred to a first-grade class at a public school in Brooklyn, where he was immediately promoted to its accelerated program. But his social life is lagging far behind.

It's no surprise. Highly gifted children tend to forge friendships the way adults do -- on the basis of shared interests and coincidental pursuits, rather than falling into packs according

to grade. "These kids just aren't likely to be part of a huge gang in the lunchroom," Berger says. "The very best their parents can do is to try and help the child find one good friend."

5. Don't sacrifice educational advancement to give your child a "normal" upbringing. Holding children back from upper-level grades and early college not only won't help them socially, it will also frustrate them -- and their teachers. "These kids will exhaust the resources of any normal classroom," Berger says. "Six-, seven- and eight-year-olds who are interested in aerospace technology shouldn't be stuck in homeroom."

Karl's far-flung pursuits could exhaust just about anyone. Having dabbled at the piano since he was 3, he recently requested a violin, and his parents have managed to borrow one. The family's apartment is cluttered with Karl's drawings of the Titanic reimagined as a medieval galleon, with his floor sculpture of Moscow's St. Basil's Cathedral reconfigured as an ancient Irish church and with the whirling presence of Karl himself.

Spinning to present his well-illustrated, self-assigned report on the Statue of Liberty, he announces: "The architect was Frederic-Auguste Bartholdi; Auguste -- I mean -- did you hear that? A-geese. I said goose!" He bursts into giggles, and for the moment, at least, Karl Jr. is completely happy and 6 years old.

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